

Original citation:

Lupton, Christina. (2016) Paper ontologies : reading Sterne with Bruno Latour. Textual Practice, 31 (2). pp. 299-313.

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Publisher's statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Textual Practice on 06/10/2016 available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1228848>

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If the attention of literary critics has turned in recent years to materiality—to objects, surfaces, and texts themselves as objects--to what extent and in what ways do we consider that materiality related to language? Can a text use language to point usefully towards its own material substratum? And how would this work if we saw the book's physical architecture as belonging to a world of objects constitutionally beyond the grasp of human knowledge and representation? The idea that texts participate materially in a world withdrawn from cognitive reach has been advanced appreciatively in different quarters of recent literary scholarship. Historians of media, for instance, have presented the materiality of a text as coming into view only after the moment of a medium's primacy: while we are still using books and paper as primary forms of inscription, we don't really see them. Knowledge of the medium always belongs in this sense to the text's "future anterior" rather than to the human reader or writer.ⁱ In the realm of the digital humanities, related kinds of invisibility have been claimed for the patterns, systems, and connections that appear only once texts become machine-readable. On various scales, the ways texts impact on each other, circulate, and resonate with historical events are also being seen as real phenomena non-apparent to the human reader unaided by computers.ⁱⁱ And certain critics have embraced the language of Object Oriented Ontology, or OOO, as theoretical scaffolding for the idea of objects withdrawn from cognitive access, illuminated only partially in their contact with humans and with each other, agential at a level other than that of signification. Here we find claims such as those made by Timothy Morton, for words that "do something as physical as what happens when my car scrapes the sidewalk" or for the relation of a text to consciousness being akin to that of the tree to the wind.ⁱⁱⁱ

My purpose in this article is not to take issue directly with any of these approaches—although I want ultimately to problematize their application to self-conscious literature--but rather to focus quite closely on *Tristram Shandy* in light of some arguments made by Bruno Latour, a critic whose advocacy for the ontological primacy of objects is influential across the three areas of literary studies I have just invoked: media history, digital humanities, and OOO. There are two claims that I want to make within this more circumscribed domain of discussion. In the first place, I will suggest that *Tristram Shandy* shows up well, perhaps even originally, in the light of the emphasis being placed on objects in their unknowability. Sterne's sense of what Jane Bennett defines as a "text-body" composed of "words on the page, words in the reader's imagination, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading room, etc., etc." can, I'll suggest, be productively read as an acknowledgement of a domain that is simultaneously tactile and cognitively out of reach.^{iv} The world its characters inhabit is famously populated by hinges the squeak, chestnuts that fall, knots that stick, and bridges that thrust. Sterne insists on these objects as unruly sites of meaning, sites for the opening up rather than pinning down of misunderstanding and contingency. A thrusting bridge must itself be interestingly hinged to land, but what its place there really demonstrates is how loosely objects are connected to the thinking they seem to occasions. A page referenced as the site of shared understanding easily recedes from view. Coupling *Tristram Shandy* to theories interested in textual embodiment as something distant from representation brings out how important this elusiveness of the material book to intellection is to Sterne's project.

Secondly, however, I want to explore the limits and competing tendencies that emerge within Latour's work when it is brought to bear on a text as discursively self-conscious about its own materiality as *Tristram Shandy*. As a text that signposts its pages, publication, typographic and codex structure, Sterne's novel supports the idea of language and object being read together. Recent editions of *Tristram Shandy* that restore its original physical form as the centerpiece of its jokes, along with scholarship that aims to situate the novel in an

eighteenth-century world of paper, serialization, and book trade, attest to a twentieth-first-century awareness of the literary critical enterprise being informed by the specificity of the book as medium.^v But putting Latour into this mix brings out what is so difficult about the synchronizing of book history and formal criticism. Sponsoring, on the one hand, the media historical work of unpacking and recognizing the significance of a text's materiality and, on the other, the accusation that modern forms of explanation most candid about the physical world are culprits in concealing its complexity, Latour's method implies that formal and materialist approaches constitute two very different ways of "reading" a text. *Tristram Shandy* becomes in these terms an example of how texts explicitly consciousness about their own materiality find themselves caught in a twenty-first century bind; one that affirms the discovery of a text's architecture while denouncing "modern" efforts to locate and identify something like the book as a referent of discourse. In one of these articulations, textual content demands no more (or less) attention than the shoes and leaves and chemical reactions that share in the text's being as object; in another, discourse needs attending to because it is responsible for concealing from us the real complexity the world's physical hold on us.

My gambit, then, is this: by looking at *Tristram Shandy* as a text that signposts its own elusiveness as object we can nuance our understanding of the operation of self-reference with which the novel is commonly associated. But we can also learn more about the dilemma that literary critics face at a point where non-dialectical forms of materialism exert a great influence on literary studies. Here we are at risk of being torn, I'll suggest, between a general endorsement of texts that convey their interest in the material—between the "good" materialisms of book history and object ontology and media studies as positions that seem almost casually to find support at the level of content in our favourite texts—and the rather different sense that texts focused on describing their own material constitution participate in the "bad" materialisms of empiricism and objectivity. Either, these terms suggest, Sterne

models objects positively in their interobjectivity because he shows how they jar and twist and cushion everyday life, providing a landscape into which cognition extends and recedes, or he forecloses this process by making it his subject of urbane humor and hubristic representation. In fact, I'll conclude, there may be a third way of thinking about the kind of materialism promoted by *Tristram Shandy*, in which language itself comes to the surface as something that is really is graspable in the posture of self reference, but which would require us to recognize it in this form as distinct from other kinds of material to which language might refer.

1. Latour's Long Career

I want to begin by thinking about a tension within Latour's own writing. Latour has been publishing for several decades now, and some of the different ways his work can be used in the literary domain reflect his own pursuit of distinct lines of interest. His strongest reputation among literary critics has been as an advocate of objects—or, more precisely, of the object-human hybrids—to which he notoriously attributes agency. Something like a fence qualifies in his account as squarely as person wearing a coat, a character in a book, or climate change as a node of action and change. These phenomena are not simply objects, but neither are they simply human. Simultaneously fact and fiction; idea and thing, all belong to the realm of “actants,” “factishes” and “hybrids” that Latour wants to make visible as the plane on which change and action occur.

Just as vital to Latour's emphasis on these hybrid objects, however, is the critique of modernity he develops by advocating for them. In his account, the whole nature of modern society is structured by its defiant repression of the interconnectedness of things and people:

Here, on the left, are things themselves; there, on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking subjects, values and of signs. Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconsciousness of the moderns.^{vi}

Disavowing the “middle” is, for Latour, the aim of representation in the “modern” world. The main symptom of this disavowal is not a failure to talk about things. On the contrary, it is the impulse to seize upon objects and physical phenomenon in their most empirical form; to describe something like the book, for instance, as a collection of pages, or a commercial enterprise, and thereby to suggest that it can be pinned down as the content of a description.

Unsurprisingly, Latour’s attack on modernity places the Enlightenment, with its commitment to the distinction between subject and object squarely at the center of the problem. But this also explains why Latour, like many theorists, has carried particular weight with scholars working with eighteenth-century literature. If this is the period when the “middle” between subject and object was most ardently refuted, it is also the period whose writings can be most productively mined for hidden evidence of that terrain. Jonathan Lamb, for instance, has shown that many of the terms associated with possessive individualism, sovereignty, and authorship begin in an understanding of objects. In his account, enlightenment personhood is implicitly modeled on things even at junctures where it seems to be all about people. Sandra Macpherson has taken a similar route in challenging the idea that the eighteenth-century novel was an institution associated only with individualism, enlisting Latour to show how many fictional plots involve objects through accident and chance associated with the life of objects. And William Warner’s recent use of Latour shows how fully material causes inform the American Revolution, an event that until now has been squarely claimed as human.^{vii}

But if one strand of Latour’s work can be used to show how entanglement of person and thing formed the underbelly of Enlightenment discourse, another points to the idea that any discursive gesture of exposing and laying bare the truth is likely to be suspect. Latour’s two recent books, *Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* (2013) and *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2011) both deconstruct gestures of denunciation as those most detrimental to

the recognition of our interconnected world. The *Inquiry*, for instance, breaks modern existence down into various systems or “modes” that feed objects: law, technology, fiction, etc. are read here as different ways of mediating between people and objects. Fiction, a mode I’ll return to shortly, becomes an accepted way of using props, screens, pages, to create worlds in which one temporarily believes. In this context, Latour characterizes straight talk, or his playfully-named agent, “Double Click,” as the one “genre” that is detrimental to all modes:

Straight talk is a literary genre that only imitates, by its seriousness, by its authoritative tone, sometimes simply by inducing boredom, certain truth conditions whose pertinence it is forever unable to manifest. This is even what makes it so dangerous for it costs straight talk nothing...to seek to insinuate itself everywhere and to disqualify all propositions that would seek to acknowledge, quite humbly, the series of transitions—mediations—through which they have to pass to reach truth.^{viii}

One way of understanding the danger of straight talk in relation to Fiction, for instance, would be to imagine it as the discourse that breaks the experience of belief down into a technical understanding of stagecraft or printing; that works as the metafictional moments in a novel like *Tristram Shandy*, telling you, for instance, that thought is as likely to be triggered by a squeaky hinge as a deliberate train of reasoning, or fiction writing by the incentive of pecuniary reward as creative inspiration.

If these two tendencies in Latour’s work can be related in the context of his social critique, they can also be seen as inviting two quite distinct kinds of discourse analysis. Take, for instance, an article he published early in his career, “On Interobjectivity,” the stated aim of which is to define the distinction between human and simian interactions.^{ix} After stressing the similar levels of complexity with which baboons and humans interact, Latour arrives at the conclusion that what separates them in the end is the facts that humans can isolate, sequester, and analyse their interactions because of objects and tools. A counter at the post office, for instance, creates the space of a dedicated interaction—however complicated the sale of stamps there gets, it remains fenced off from the complexity of general existence. A fence is an indispensable agent in bringing human intentions to bear on the world, as well as

in making it clear that human intentions could have no temporal extension without objects. Similarly, the borders on a computer-generated table, or the dimensions of a page, make it possible in Latour's account to create data sets, and information, and thus to isolate patterns of, say, gendered behaviour, or the water flow in a city sewage system, as an object of study.

In this register, Latour's work can seem compatible with the kinds of work scholars are now doing in thinking about page, paper, document formats. etc. Latour's approach seems to invite this work in the most intelligent of ways – not just as a matter of media determinism, but as an understanding of the dividing, sequesterings, and extensions of cognition for which media have provided the formats. If, for instance, we want to know how many times Tristram Shandy was cited in the decades after its publication, we can now find this out by doing searches for combination of words in the all-but-complete digital archives. Literary history is a matter of dividing up, and extending word combinations through space and time. Although he is not thinking specifically about literature in its material shape as a book, or a printed discourse, Latour points in this vein to the way the books give shape to, partly by separating to and cordoning off, certain kinds of interactions, from others. Implicit here are ideas we have heard more recently in the realm of textual studies and media history, such as: the phenomenon of print underpins the idea of authorship, the digital environment creates new forms of truth, the shape of the codex book is significant in the way we read and fence narrative off from other kinds of experience.^x

But if we skip ahead twenty years, to an argument from Latour's more recent book, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, his argument seems to apply differently to discourse that describes the object. Here, rather than looking at objects, Latour's focus is on the role of discourse in concealing our absolute intertwinedness with them. Specifically, he argues, the role of the "critical thinker" in Modernity has involved a denouncing of certain objects—totems, idols, fetishes—as pure invention, subject to our control, and an assertion of others being pure fact, beyond the reach of our power. This creates what he characterizes as the see-

sawing movement of critical thought. “If,” writes Latour, “you believe you are being manipulated by idols, they (the critical thinkers) will show you that you have created them with your own hands; but if you proudly boast of your ability to create so freely, they will show you that invisible forces are manipulating you and making you their agent without your knowledge.”^{xi} While the truth, for Latour, lies in between these extremes (things, of which books, and characters in books, are one of his favoured examples, are made *and* they control us), our habits as sceptics have deprived us of the ability to name this practical zone in which we operate everyday, by accepting the objectivity of things that originate in human activity. Thus while the writer, to use Latour’s example, knows only too well that it is possible to be both the creator of characters and to be at the mercy of ones materials, critical discourse sets these up as alternatives: either one makes a book, in which case one controls it, or it belongs to the realm of the empirically given, in which case one perceives oneself to be at its mercy.

Now, as I’ve suggested, Latour’s two assertions, 1] that interobjectivity is ontologically prior to our perception of reality and 2] that our discourses denouncing certain fetishes while reinstating others allow us to avoid this fact, are not necessarily at odds philosophically. But my purpose in getting at *Tristram Shandy* in this way is to suggest that for literary critics, these two sides of Latour’s approach easily fall into competition with each other. On the one hand, Latour’s earlier arguments for interobjectivity invite us to read any text gesturing towards its involvement with objects as positive. In particular, we are likely to see a text that mentions its own technologies of inscription and reproduction as exceptionally candid, even progressive, in advancing our recognition our cultural entanglement with objects. But on the other, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* suggests, a text that describes how it is made can just as easily be read as a participant in that festival of fetish-shaming, in which exposing an object as a human creation is only one aspect of that aggressively rational discourse that allows, by a sleight of hand, the real fetishes of the Moderns to pass as empirically existent.

The parsing of the book in its materiality, which appears constructive in one articulation, easily becomes a decoy in the other.

2. Tristram's Many Books

I want to turn, then, to *Tristram Shandy*, a text oriented more persistently than any other in its period towards the hard facts of its own material substratum. This involves, to use some of the more famous examples, Sterne flagging marbled page and chapter ending as stumbling blocks to meaning; dedications as mercenary; his references to pages as things that get torn, rewritten, or repaginated; his sense of Tristram as a writer with pen in hand and aspirations to authorship. In all of these moments, Sterne assumes the kind of entanglement of self and book, or object more generally, that Latour sees as obscured by eighteenth-century discourse in particular. But what seems like a potentially simple application of Latour's work to the undeniable presence of this novel's "text-body" becomes more complicated if we ask in more detail after the relationship of Sterne's discussions about such material encounters to these encounters themselves. In the first place, for instance, it's unclear whether *Tristram Shandy* stands from an Object-Oriented Perspective as a text-body like any other; that is, as a book that involves paper and print and smell and the contingency of its own circulation; that works, as Morton would put it, like a car scraping a sidewalk. Is it a stronger presence in these terms because of the persistence with which Sterne tells us that his book works scrapes, drags, breaks and turns?

Let me turn here to a specific example: the way Sterne handles the materiality of the page. *Tristram Shandy* is famous, of course, for revealing the conventions of book writing, allowing us to peek behind the scenes at the way Sterne himself seems to squirt ink, end chapters, tear out pages and reckon with future volumes of his work. As narrator, Tristram also frequently describes the novel as codex book in his hands:

Upon looking back from the end of the last chapter and surveying the texture of what has been wrote, it is necessary, that upon this page and the five following, a good quantity of heterogenous matter be inserted, to keep up that just balance betwixt wisdom and folly, without which a book would not hold together a single year.^{xii}

Gestures like these are widely celebrated as ventilating Sterne's fiction to various kinds of readerly agency, to recognition of the real practices that authors and readers participate in giving meaning to a book. In Sterne's hands, a book is acknowledged as something made, sat on, torn up, bought, sold, forgotten; an object as likely to take hold of us as we of it, but also one we are at liberty to flick through, read against the grain, or walk by in the shop.

And yet, while *Tristram Shandy* clearly describes to us the book in its practical dimension, it isn't clear how closely this description refers to the book we are actually reading. It is generally the page, for instance, that the text refers to as its material unit. The environment in which *Tristram* works is one where the majority of documents are unbound. Sermons fly around unidentified, prefaces get inserted, pages get torn up and misapplied. There are "accounts to reconcile: Anecdotes to pick up: Inscriptions to make out: Stories to weave in: Traditions to sift: Personages to Call upon: Panegyrics to paste up at this door: Pasquinades at that." "To sum up all," declares *Tristram*, "there are archives at every stage to be looked into, and rolls, records, documents and endless genealogies" to be looked into by the historiographer.^{xiii}

Tristram's sense of being asked to handle and produce a narrative as a series of discrete and comparable pages is transferred to Sterne's reader, whose own attention is drawn to the page as the thing he or she is being asked to turn, see coming, or register as a blank surface on which the imprint has been made. This comes out in the careful reading Christopher Fanning gives in his 1998 article "On Sterne's Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces in *Tristram Shandy*," which urges, "a consideration of Sterne's attention to the physical material of the book in relation to questions of narrative presence in *Tristram Shandy*."^{xiv} Pulling away from metaphorical and typographical understandings of spatiality in

narrative, Fanning insists that Sterne was thinking literally about blank paper as an instrument that could be used in creating narrative effect--for instance, by using wide gaps between sentences as occasions to slow down, and to create particular rhythms for the novel. "The very physical space on the page," argues Fanning of *Tristram Shandy*, "increases the impact of the satire, offering not just a score for performance but a performance in itself, more subtle than the obvious typographic ploys for attention that force their presence upon the reader, because it operates by means of absence, empty space."^{xv}

Fanning's argument was well ahead of the curve of studies drawing attention to the particularity of reading on paper, as well—obviously—of Thing Theory and OOO as literary propositions. But he offers a lucid account of Sterne's engagement with the book that holds up well to the questions only now emerging about what makes books and pages so specific as reading technologies, as well as to current assertions regarding mediation in its ontological primacy. Between the lines of Fanning's piece, there's an argument to be found about the management of unoccupied paper as something that can slow down and speed up reading as an activity in ways that do not translate easily to the display of text on a networked device or electronic screen. But there is also a sense of Sterne being literally able to share blankness; to assume that the encounter with the blank page is something that involves him and his reader, if not at the same time, then at least in the same space.

From a book historical point of view, it can be argued that the page really is the only shape in which writing can be said to make itself visible. Peter Stoicheff and Andrew Taylor point out that:

The book itself is never fully encountered except as an expectation or recollection or closed volume. The page, by contrast, is seen in its entirety, simultaneously. It is the constant presence, directly encountered, in the otherwise insubstantial engagement with the mirage of the book.^{xvi}

Sterne, however, does not focus only on the page. *Tristram Shandy*, also strives to make the book visible. Sometimes this involves speaking of sequence, as in this case where Tristram, taking up a moment from Swift, talks about the composition of his book:

I have dropped the curtain over this scene for a minute,--to remind you of one thing, and to inform you of another. What I have to inform you, comes, I own, a little out of its due course; for it should have been told a hundred and fifty pages ago, but that I foresaw then 'twould come in pat hereafter and be of more advantage here than elsewhere.^{xvii}

Tristram refers here to the spatial layout of the page—divided now, by a chapter break—as well as to the arrangement of pages he has previously written in relation to each other. In doing so, he assumes the book itself being a stable point of contact between reader and writer: both Tristram and his reader are inside the same book; and both at liberty to manipulate its paginated form (to get the specificity of this, one might need to think of hypertext as an alternative); both liberated in this movement by pages being bound and fixed in a certain order.

But these references to the book undermine the arguably indexical nature of his references to the page, for they betray quite clearly the absence of a shared object of reference. This is not to say that Tristram himself should not be imagined as a purveyor of books; a manipulator of the codex machine. As Karen Harvey has recently argued, plenty of eighteenth-century male writing was being done in the bound diaries, logs, and registrars that presented themselves as blanks to be filled in, poured over and even edited, even as they were also seen as finite and fixed permutations of pages.^{xviii} And Lisa Gitelman and Peter Stallybrass have suggested that even when documents were printed, they were often printed as frameworks within which writing was then produced: the possibility of layout and form being there first and creative writing second is not illogical.^{xix} In fact, locating Tristram as a writer in this environment helps to suggest just how important turning backwards and forwards in an already paginated environment might be to his own sense of contending with his family history.

But the connection of *Tristram Shandy* as an already paginated text to the novel it becomes is unavoidably fictional; a mirage in the terms of Stoicheff and Taylor. The unbound pages on which Sterne himself wrote have no literal connection to the materiality of the single volume book that Sterne's first readers would have held. And when Tristram refers to the book as a thing in our possession, with covers, volumes, a publishing history, and a physical presence, as he does in the example above, the plausibility of his gesture to a shared space, such as the blank, is lost. To take Tristram seriously, one would have to imagine the novel as a book that existed before its pages were written. From the point of view of the aspirant writer, Sterne, like all other self-reflexive authors, contributes to the fallacy of the empirically available book by acting proleptically on the premise of its existence. His sense of pages forming a space in which the reader can move around by turning and skipping—something that critics including Fanning often celebrate as his awareness of a material reality—is at its point of inception as imaginary as his characters. But the lie is not straightforward. For Sterne's candid reference to the pages that do exist, and which also exist in our hands, do double duty as fictions *and* as signposts to the empirical reality of the book-that-is-not-yet-there.

Thus, while Sterne's exposure of the Tristram's writing process can be glossed at a general level as involving candour about the reader scampering around his novel, turning back to look at the cover, or failing to read a chapter closely, it must be seen at a more specific one as involving the fiction of the book being accessible as an entity about which the author can speak before it is written; the mysterious alignment of manuscript page with the printed page now in the reader's hand.

3.

If we accept that *Tristram Shandy* playfully indexes a material that it did not take—could not have taken—at the point of its conception, then Sterne's interest in the material can be read as

pointing in two quite differently fictional directions. Following the first involves returning to Latour's positive emphasis on discovering the entwinement of person and thing and situating Sterne's failure to represent the material reality of the book as a felicitous strategy. His pointers to the book appear in this register as deliberate underscoring of paper's elusiveness as a real reference, one that would be read by many today as honoring this reality in the only way possible.

The critics who have worked most closely with Latour in the realm of literary criticism, Graham Harman and Morton, both support the idea that the writers who conspire with the aims of OOO are those who recognize the nature of the material world as withdrawn from view. "When it comes to grasping reality" asserts Harman in relation to H.P. Lovecraft, "illusion and innuendo are the best we can do."^{xx} This same point has been around for some time in relation to Sterne's writing as simultaneously illuminating and designating paper as out of reach. Fanning for instance, argues that the Scriblerians and their inheritor, Sterne, were preoccupied simultaneously with their texts as physical things, "literalized metaphor," and with the impossibility of this physical realm ever being harnessed effectively to thought or language. "Sterne," he argues, uses "the possibilities of print by creating an unavoidable textual presence supplementary to the supposed referents of the printed words"^{xxi}

The supplementary nature of that materialist presence, evocative of and closely related to the domain of writing invoked by poststructuralist readings of writing, is celebrated in OOO terms as the domain that renders representation of material reality incomplete. Citing Derrida, Morton, for instance, refers to the "externality" of the text as something that "it can't talk about, but that it can't help referencing in the negative," going on to suggest that "the existence of a text is its coexistence with at least one (1+n) withdrawn entity."^{xxii} While this description does not single out texts thematically engaged with their own externality as unreachable, it suggests that Harman and Morton would commend a writer like Sterne on grounds very similar to Fanning, as recognizing materiality through an affirmation of what

cannot actually be said about it. In these terms, Sterne's general invocation of the fictional entity of the codex book can be read as an admirable rejoinder to Tristram's more indexical gestures of pointing, for instance, to the space of page.

But this does not exhaust the ways in which *Tristram Shandy's* signposting of paper can be interpreted in new materialist terms. For the gesture can also take us back to Latour's point that the critic's "straight talking" denunciation of the fetish object is the strongest instrument of modern duplicity. Modern belief, he argues, is a complex configuration through which, "in order to understand their own actions, the Moderns forbid themselves to return to fetishes even though they continue to use them."^{xxiii} In these terms *Tristram Shandy's* insistent bringing the page to light as something made, sold, turned, and handled—something whose empirical status as a non-fetish becomes in Sterne's capable hands its own fad—is a return by the back door of the empirical fact of the book as a fetish of its own kind.

In these terms, we might see *Tristram Shandy* and the host of other eighteenth-century fictions that gesture playfully towards their own status as commodities and reading machines as advancing the defetishization of the book that was happening during the eighteenth-century – and is arguably happening now as book and media history. It is now generally acknowledged that, however the new magic of print worked in this moment, it generally contributed to the devaluing of the book as mystical object. While the book gains power as medium during the eighteenth century, it loses power as object. In the classic words of Ernst Curtius, images of writing and book making to be found after the "Technological Age" work against the book as symbol, ensuring that in its visibility as a technology it "no longer possesses a unique, a felt, a conscious "life-relationship."^{xxiv} References to writing's material substratum that appear as matter-of-fact in this moment can promote the transformation of book from sacred object to tool, concealing from us, never with complete success, the extent to which this binary is itself a lie, a covering up the way in books continue to function as

objects of power even, and more strongly, because, of our efforts to locate them in a material world over which we have practical and cognitive control.

In the *Inquiry*, Latour argues for fiction as one of the few modes that allows for us to glimpse this paradox. As participants of fiction (users of stage, page, and screen), he suggests, we recognize paper-mache, cinema seats, and the books we hold as the instruments of our intentions and machinations, while at the same time acknowledging them as crucial enablers of the parallel lives in which fiction—at least temporarily---allows us to dwell. Latour offers here a very important definition of fiction; one that has capacity to energize and transform literary and media studies by suggesting how media technologies and the narratives they support converge as a specific and positive mode of subject-object relation. But Latour's endorsement of fiction is also enormously problematic, particularly in its bias towards texts that work mimetically. In his terms, the forces that pull one out of the cinema by reminding one of the economic reality of Hollywood, or direct one's eyes to the object in one's hand, do not belong to fiction itself.

Of course its always possible to always argue, as I have done in relation to *Tristram Shandy* and its slippage between page and book, that even novels making consciousness of the medium their signature move, participate in the mode of Fiction. In so far as books are always further out of reach than the appearance of the page infers, made by us and active in making us, they are always less discrete and more complicated as objects than their gesture of pointing to themselves implies. In this general sense, the art of making pages visible as a technology or as ontologically prior to human discourse is bound to undo itself in the ways that Latour argues all discourses of de-fetishisation do. But this leaves us without any more specific understanding of why novels or poems that concern themselves with their own objecthood, that attempt to direct us thematically to the autonomous involvement of the material world in all our experiences of perception, differ from those that simply do what any kind of fiction does by allowing us to recognize the feeling of being grabbed by, or inside of, or

under the sway of, a book. Latour is not very imaginative here about the particular role of self-conscious fiction in contributing to the juncture at which subject and object merge. But he's also not very encouraging about the need to look at fictions that actively concern objects at all: reading in a fictional mode involves a recognition of the material substratum on which the text appears, no matter what the text says. In these terms, so long as *Tristram Shandy* is seen as fiction, the charges of defetshisation that could otherwise be laid against it in Latour's terms can be dropped—but only on the grounds that it works like any other novel.

My discussion in this paper has been orientated fairly critically towards showing that the terms of OOO as they are being taken up in literary studies force us to steer a course between either affirming fictional texts that celebrate objects as representationally unapproachable but permitted partners in the fictional enterprise, or condemning texts that perform the operation of revealing objects on the grounds that this kind of revelation actually conceals from us our true imbrication with them. *Tristram Shandy*, like many other texts, belongs in neither of these camps. While Sterne shares with recent advocates of OOO a sense of the elusive or “sublime” aspect of the material text—for instance, the codex book itself-- he nevertheless operates in a mode of revelation; his novel really does point to its own physical constitution. Its indexicality is up for debate but not entirely ruled out. And its references make a difference to the way we experience the text-body in our hands. With this example in mind we might, I'd suggest, reconsider the possibility of language and text being becoming constitutive of a material domain that can, in fact, be made visible. I am thinking here of an argument Mark Hansen has made for the visibility for climate change. Arguing with Morton, Hansen suggests that it would be a mistake to imagine something like climate change being out there, beyond the reach of the statisticians who measure it. Climate change, he suggests, is no more or less than those measurements, graspable insofar as its form is that of its representation.^{xxv} If we are willing to think in similar terms about the book, then novels that illuminate their own being as books participate in a material realm located at just the point

they say it is – in our hands, and in the language that describes their presence there. As book, I'd waiver, *Tristram Shandy* is less elusive than most objects because it makes this claim to material existence as something that words do help constitute, even as they show up materiality's defiance of intellection. A reference to a thrusting bridge in *Tristram Shandy* exposes the ravine that thought opens up between word and thing. But a reference to the page you just turned traverses that divide different, insisting on a material practice of reading and writing can only be grasped right there in that space, even as language points to the hardware of the book receding into the distance.

ⁱ The term 'future anterior' comes from Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005. Trans. Rachel Bowlby) and has been taken up in media studies by Meredith McGill and Andrew Parker in "The Future of the Literary Past" *PMLA* 125.4 (2012), p. 959.

ⁱⁱ Here, we might think of Andrew Piper's endorsement of what he calls "Topographical Reading" ("Reading's Refrain: From Bibliography to Topology." *ELH*. 80.2. (Summer 2013) pp. 373-399) or of work being done more generally in the digital humanities, for instance in Franco Moretti's Literary Laboratory at Stanford.

ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History* 43:2, 2012. P. 215.

^{iv} Jane Bennett, *New Literary History* 43:2, 2012, p.232.

^v See, for instance, Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, The Moderns and The Novel* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) as well as the work of Christopher Fanning and Karen Harvey cited below.

^{vi} Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 37.

^{vii} Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton: PUP, 2011); Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) and William Warner, *Protocols of Liberty: Communication Innovation and the American Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013).

^{viii} Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, 2013), 134.

^{ix} Bruno Latour, "On Interobjectivity," *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, Vol 3: No 4, 1996, 228-245.

^x For examples of scholars working with the materiality of the book in this context, see Bonnie Mak, *How The Page Matters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) and Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

^{xi} Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

^{xii} Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: OUP), p.559

^{xiii} *Ibid*, 1.14.

^{xiv} Christopher Fanning, "On Sterne's Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol 10:4, p. 430.

^{xv} *Ibid*,. 443.

^{xvi} Peter Stoiceff and Andrew Taylor, "Introduction: Architectures, Ideologies and Materials of the Page," in *The Future of the Page* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 3.

^{xvii} Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 128-129.

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- ^{xviii} Karen Harvey, 'The Manuscript History of Tristram Shandy' *Review of English Studies* (August 2013), pp. 1-21.
- ^{xix} Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge* (Duke University Press, 2014), 29-35.
- ^{xx} Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012), p. 51.
- ^{xxi} Christopher Fanning, "The Scriblerian Sublime," *Studies in English Literature* 45.3, p.657. (2005): 647–67, 662.
- ^{xxii} Morton, 219
- ^{xxiii} Latour, *Factish Gods*, 16.
- ^{xxiv} Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, William Trask, Trans. (Princeton), 347.
- ^{xxv} Mark Hansen, "The Physicality of the Medium," *ELH*, forthcoming 2016